

JSC team formed to handle critical incidents

It can come in the form of a deadly tornado, or blow in as a major hurricane. It can be as bold as a terrorist attack, or as sudden as a coworker's fatal heart attack.

No matter how a crisis presents itself at Johnson Space Center, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is prepared to help with the emotional aftermath.

EAP Director Jackie Reese has developed a team trained to assist with a JSC-related crisis. The newly formed Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) team is comprised of employees serving as facilitators.

"I asked for volunteers from areas in which people use people skills as part of their day-to-day work," Reese said.

JSC has a definite need for such a team. "We are a population of over 10,000 folks. When something impacts one member of our 'family' it impacts others as well," said Reese, who works for Kelsey Seybold under the Occupational Health contract.

JCS's vulnerability to traumatizing events is not limited to space-related incidents, she said. Other crisis situations can include:

- ◆ Traumatic deaths (accidents, murders, suicides)
- ◆ Sudden serious illnesses (heart attacks, cancer)
- ◆ Work place violence (violent employees, stalkers)
- ◆ Natural disasters (hurricanes, floods)
- ◆ Terrorist attacks

The spectrum is broad when it comes to what constitutes a critical incident, said Roger Solomon, Ph.D., a certified CISM trainer working with the JSC team.

A critical incident is "any situation resulting in an overwhelming sense of vulnerability and/or lack of control," said Solomon, an international expert who trains and lectures around the world. He consults for private industry and other federal agencies, including the FBI.

When called upon, the CISM team will offer defusings immediately for emergency personnel and victims.

"Defusings are 30-minute, low-key interventions that provide initial stabilization shortly after an incident – preferably before folks go home," Reese said. "We lessen the stress of the incident by normalizing the reactions folks have."

The team also works to help them become 'grounded' again and regain a sense of safety by helping them identify positive or functional coping plans. By doing this the team identifies people who need additional support or services.

In addition, defusings and debriefings will be available for everyone impacted in the days and weeks that follow.

Debriefings are more involved interventions lasting for a few hours. They typically take place a few days after an incident, when people start feeling the effects.

The affected discuss their reactions, learn about typical reactions to trauma, identify their own coping resources and are offered other tools for adaptive coping.

"We help folks develop a self-care plan and offer resources for additional help," Reese said. "We will follow up for at least a year post-incident to see how they are doing."

Studies show that both defusing and debriefing are highly effective tools, Reese said. They are used to mitigate or minimize the effects of trauma, as well as prevent more long-term effects, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

While they have yet to respond to a crisis, team members are now prepared to act when needed. Reese stressed the CISM team is not comprised of professional counselors. "They are facilitators that work under the direction and supervision of the EAP mental health professionals," she said.

Employees may serve on the team as long as they want. "I ask for a two-year commitment, as the training is a big investment," Reese said. "I hope they stay with it for the duration of their employment here."

She is looking to enlist the help of more employees. "I am interested in building this team and will be asking for more volunteers to train next year," she said. "Anyone with good people skills, good coping skills and a willingness to help would be welcomed."

Reese believes this team is a vital component in the EAP's service to the JSC community. "I have wanted to do this since I started here because we have such a large population and have had many traumatic losses," she said.

Creating the JSC CISM program has been satisfying for Reese, especially when she sees the team's focus and desire to help those in need.

"They work well together and have been eager to learn about critical incident management and debriefing," Reese said. "They are a wonderful group of folks who understand the importance of providing support and education for fellow employees during times of crisis."

HR's Amy Mendez takes her role as a CISM team member seriously.

"As we've seen this past year, the shock of a tragedy is a hard thing to work through. Having a team like this at JSC enhances the EAP's resources available to JSC people and



NASA JSC 2002e16810 Photo by Bill Stafford

Pictured is JSC's first Critical Incident Management Team. Front row, from left, is Sandra Parker, Center Operations-NASA; Erin Bly, Lisa Tice, Gail Howell and Jackie Reese, all Occupational Health-Kelsey Seybold; and Linda LaPradd, Sue Leibert, Stacey Medina, Beth Hall and Amy Mendez, all Human Resources-NASA. Back row, from left, is Teresa Luker, Occupational Health-Kelsey Seybold; and Natalie Saiz, Kim Wilson, Karl Schuler, and Brad Mudgett, all Human Resources-NASA. Not pictured: Sandra Amundson, Occupational Health-Kelsey Seybold; and Eric Thomas, Human Resources-NASA.

adds another human element to the emergency response team," she said.

"I see this team helping with a whole range of issues: From helping a small group or branch work through a co-worker's death to being part of the response team for a bigger tragedy or crisis."

Mendez is no stranger to crisis counseling. She ran a crisis center for a year while in college, and she was a crisis counselor for two years. In addition, she has a psychology undergraduate degree, and a master's degree in behavioral science and human resources.

"I volunteered because I wanted to help JSC people in any way I could, should a tragedy or disaster occur," she said. "It also connected to a lot of my background...I guess it's in my blood."

Sandra Parker also felt the call to support her coworkers. "As with most Americans, I was deeply affected by the September 11 attacks and was having a very difficult time dealing with the tragedy," she said. "Like so many others, I felt so helpless."

Parker now feels like she can make a difference for others through the CISM team. "It has provided me with the tools that if, God forbid, something like this happens again, at least I will be prepared to help." ♦



NASA JSC 2002e16815 Photo by Bill Stafford
EAP Director Jackie Reese works with employee volunteer Amy Mendez (seated) during CISM training.



CUT AND SAVE

What to do in case of a critical incident:

- ◆ If the critical incident requires emergency personnel, call x33333. The Employee Assistance Program's Critical Incident Stress Management team will be notified as part of the Emergency Response Team.
- ◆ If the critical incident is not an emergency, you can call the EAP office directly at x36130.
- ◆ Center management, supervisors and human resources representatives can also assist in obtaining crisis services.